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Reflections on social work 2020 under Covid-19 online magazine

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Reflections on Social Work 2020 under Covid-19 Online Magazine

Abstract

Social Work 2020 under Covid-19 was a free online magazine conceived just before the UK's Covid-19 full lockdown began, in late March 2020. It ran for five editions until July 14th, 2020. In this time it published close to one hundred articles from academics, people with lived experience, practitioners and students. It contained a far higher proportion of submissions from the last three groups of contributors than traditional journals. This article draws on the six person editorial collective's reflections on the magazine: it considers its founding purposes; its role in fostering social work community, utilising an adaptation of social capital classifications; and its potential as a learning tool. It concludes by arguing that the magazine illustrates the potential for a free online publications to be an important emergent vehicle for 'everyday activism' within the field of social work.

Introduction

Social Work 2020 under Covid-19 Magazine (hereafter 'SW2020') was conceived on 19 March, 2020, shortly before the UK went into full lockdown, as an outlet which would allow the articulation of issues connected to Covid-19 and social work. It was hosted via a WordPress template on a university web space. It was free both to submit to and read and remains openly available (see: <https://sw2020covid19.group.shef.ac.uk>.) Articles submitted to it were non-blind reviewed by two of the six person editorial collective. The magazine was successful in attracting a large number of submissions in a short period of time. The fifth and final edition of the magazine was published on July 14th, and just under 100 submissions were published in a four month period from authors in all four UK countries, Australia, Canada, China, Ireland and Israel, as well as a piece which took a comparative perspective on the UK and Greece. A tracking feature using Google Analytics was added to the site for the time of the fifth and final edition: this recorded that in the 30 days after the final edition was published, the magazine site had 3,534 different viewing sessions and 6,506 page views. The majority of visits were from UK locations, but as well as all of the countries mentioned above, there were site visits from Egypt, India, Netherlands, New Zealand, Finland and France, suggesting a

substantial international reach. It is harder to determine with clarity who the readership was but, based on messages and email responses to the collective, it would appear that the magazine was popular with practitioners and academics, with some, but smaller, readership amongst people with lived experience and students. In terms of authorship, the magazine has attracted submissions from a diverse range of authors including academics at different career stages, people with lived experience, practitioners, practice educators and students.

In contrast to *SW2020*, traditional journals tend to be developed, published and supported by large publishing houses. They are therefore better administratively supported than free publications such as this, and they are a lucrative business for the publishing houses which own them. They are based on costly subscription which subscribing institutions and individuals pay and which tends to restrict full access to all journal articles to academics and students who attend subscribing institutions. In the UK, there has been a recent push to publish versions of articles freely online, either by mandating that large grant-funded research pay journals for open access publication or via publishing pre-final publication versions of articles on university repositories, albeit with a time delay. Buryani (2017) reported that the global revenues of academic publishing totalled more than £19bn, with very large profit margins of over 30%. There are a small number of open access journals in the social work field, notably including *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* journal (<https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/index>), which is also managed by an editorial collective, and which provided some inspiration for *SW2020*. Nonetheless, the best known journals with the highest impact factors, and therefore the most prestigious for academics to publish in, remain those run by publishing houses, with subscription only access.

Starting SW2020

The collective were conscious of the barriers to accessing traditional journals which those outside academic institutions face listed above. The technical content and style of writing valorised and encouraged in some academic journals is also prohibitive of wider non-academic consumption. This is not necessarily a criticism: technical content is a necessary part of scientific publication and – though more contentious - difficult academic prose also has its place within academic literature, particularly in the social science and humanities. We were clear, however, that as a

collective that we wished to produce something substantively different to these types of output given that one of our primary motivations was to provide an open outlet for the many issues, difficulties and creative responses related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need for sense making around these. We were conscious that there were limited immediate platforms to raise these issues, start dialogue and record experiences.

While journal articles tend to have a longer lasting impact, there is a significant timelag to publication. In addition, though submission to academic journals is not restricted to academics, the format of submission is often ill-suited to the types of output which people with lived experience, practitioners and students are more likely to produce. Many do have access to Twitter, blogs and other online media, which provide an some outlet for the dissemination of ideas. However, the reach these provide are typically connected to an author's pre-existing platform and, whatever their immediate impact, tend to be ephemeral. *SW2020* may therefore be thought of as a middle ground between journal articles and individual online outputs. Editions have consisted of a combination of blog-like posts, some in the form of shorter academic-type articles, some reflective and personal pieces, with some poetry, video submissions and a cartoon. The advantages of the format of *SW2020* over more traditional journals has been its immediacy and accessibility for both authors and readers; its advantage over other individual online formats has been the collection of ideas on social work and Covid together in a single space, along with the enhanced profile which, collectively, that has given the contributions.

The choice of WordPress was made as it is a widely available platform for publishing blog-type posts, which is heavily used and is free to use. A WordPress template requires to be set up on webspace which requires some technical skill, though there are free versions of templates available online. In our case this task were facilitated by the fact the magazine could be hosted freely on the university web space of the first author, and the fact that a learning technologist attached to the lead author's university helped generate the initial template. Had this support not been available, there would have been a small cost implication to enable hosting of the WordPress site and the establishment of the online magazine may have taken slightly longer. Once the template was set up, the process of uploading the articles requires becoming familiar with the WordPress site, but it is fairly intuitive for lay people with substantial experience of day to day computing - the WordPress format

is also flexible in allowing both text, weblinks and visual material to be easily uploaded. In short, although there are some small 'barriers to entry' to setting up a WordPress site, these should be surmountable for most looking to establish similar ventures.

Editing the magazine

As an editorial collective we came together principally as people who had a mixture of publishing, editing and reviewing experience, mainly as academics from different university institutions in UK with varied experience of publishing in academic formats, but also in one case as a current practitioner who disseminates ideas regularly via Twitter and blog media. We invited a social work student and a person with lived experience to join the collective but, while interested, they were unable to do so due to work pressures. The fact that we had a range of connections and established Twitter profiles was useful in the magazine gaining traction: we were able to promote the initial idea of the magazine, principally via Twitter, and gain sufficient interest for initial submissions, from a range of authors, for the first edition. In turn this generated attention from others in the social work field and further contributions.

Although the collective have different expertise, profiles and platforms we share some commitments. Amongst these are a recognition that while knowledge of the social world is possible, such knowledge is tentative, perspectival and values-infused – this should lead to some epistemic humility about our assertions. Secondly, that open commitments to social justice are an intrinsic part of good social work practice and knowledge. Finally, we believe that grassroot voices, whether they be of people with lived experiences, practitioners or students, should be supported and given more prominence within social work. We also acknowledge within our approach the importance of pluralism – that contributors may hold viewpoints with which we might not fully agree. We encouraged such submissions so long as they were consistent with our understanding of social work values. Hence, the magazine had a commitment to encouraging both a diversity of opinion, and to a plurality of knowledge types.

We were conscious of trying to ensure that we included editors who had geographically spread networks across the UK: editors were based in north and south England, Scotland and Wales. We lacked representation from Northern Ireland and attempted to address that gap by approaching several contacts in Northern

Ireland for submissions. It was also important that the collective had interests that included, and crossed over, between children's social care, adult services and social work education. There was a gender balance within the collective and three of the six editors are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The issue of ethnicity has always been significant, but re-emerged as a central issue of concern within the time the magazine has operated – notably in respect of the elevated death rates for Black and Asian people due to Covid and also the Black Lives Matter campaigns, both of which were discussed within magazine contributions.

The lack of representation of Black and ethnic minority colleagues within the academy – and by extension many journals – had already become a considerable area of discussion prior to the Covid crisis (Bhambra et al., 2018). The period since Covid has re-emphasised the need to decolonise the academy. Issues of gender representation and gender politics in the academy have also been noted as a pressing concern. Again, the period since Covid has highlighted inequalities: for example, journal submissions by men in some subjects have increased notably more than those by women in the recent period (Muric'et al., 2020). It was therefore welcome that the diversity and balance of the editorial collective magazine was reflected in the healthy gender balance, and notable number of authors from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, who were published in the magazine.

The core guidelines for submissions were kept deliberately minimal. These were that written submissions should be 500 – 1,500 words although we did allow articles slightly over this length; that more academic pieces should keep academic references to a minimum, possibly using hyperlinks as an alternative; that other creative inputs (creative writing and pictures were encouraged); that they should be related in some way to social work and the Covid-19 pandemic; that, they could be of any perspective so long as they were consistent with the core social work values. As editions progressed it became hard to keep academic references low in academic pieces and strictly adhere to the upper word limit of longer pieces, particularly in the timescales required for publication of timely editions; so we did relent on strict adherence to these two guidelines while still maintaining them where possible.

Each submission to the magazine was separately reviewed by two members of the editorial collective primarily based on its relevance to social care, social work and Covid-19; the originality of the subject matter compared to other published articles, particularly in the same edition of the magazine; and, the quality of the

writing as appropriate to the kind of submission it was. In around ten per cent of submissions a third editor was asked to give a view where the two reviewing editors were unsure of what the final feedback or decision should be. Our aim was to publish as many of the submissions we received as possible, preferring to try to work with authors to make amendments to pieces, rather than rejecting them. We did still reject a relatively small proportion of submissions. Rejection did not mean we felt these submissions were without value or unpublishable. Rather, the primary reason for rejection was that a piece covered substantially similar thematic issues to previously accepted submissions, and therefore risked substantial overlap in content.

A platform for grassroots voices

The need to raise the profile and status of frontline voices in social work has been articulated several times before (e.g. Parton 2004; Munro, 2011). However, this argument has mostly been framed in terms of frontline practitioners' professional authority and autonomy within their job role, rather than in terms of a platform for all stakeholders to be able to publicly voice issues of concern. Indeed, policy makers have sometimes sought to specifically restrict practitioners from accessing such platforms. One prominent example was former Justice Minister, Chris Grayling's, threat to discipline frontline probation staff if they spoke out about his ill-fated plans to privatise the probation service on social media (Travis, 2013). In 2014, Grayling controversially forced through the part-privatisation of the English probation service, despite warnings from within the service. In 2018, after Grayling had left this ministerial post, the decision was reversed after analysis showed that the changes were both hugely costly and that re-offending rates had substantially increased (Grierson, 2019). Similar restrictions were placed on NHS staff voicing criticisms of government policy during the Covid pandemic (Johnson, 2020).

Grassroots voices have also been very poorly engaged in the reform agenda for children's social work in England (e.g. Author, 2020). Some analogous, but different, issues arise in terms of the voices of people with lived experiences of social work services. The risks of tokenism have been well noted, with the simultaneous veneration of the expertise provided by those with lived experience in the university classroom, and the marginalisation of it as a source of knowledge for social work practice (Author, 2016). The development of a narrow conception of what constitutes evidence for social work practice within policy making circles, typically focussed on a

prizing of 'effectiveness' studies based on quantitative experimental data, has played its part in downgrading the status of experiential knowledge as a source of learning for social work practice. We would contend that experiential knowledge is integral to social work and should be considered as different to, but no lesser than, other forms of evidence for practice.

The building of social work community?

In this section we draw on adaptations of social capital classifications to think through how *SW2020* may have contributed towards building 'community' in social work, and also some of its potential limitations. Social capital bonds have been proposed as an explanatory concept underpinning individual and community development, opportunities and well-being (Lin, 2001). There are multiple debates about social capital including: the empirical validity of its categorisations; the extent to which its acquisition is at the individual or group level; and, the extent to which its effects are inclusionary or reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu 1986, Lin, 2001, Putnam 1993; 2000). We do not have scope to consider these debates fully but, notwithstanding them, we propose that an adaptation of social capital categories provides a useful analytical tool to help think through the ways in which *SW2020* may have supported community development amongst social work stakeholders.

A working definition of social capital is: "Resources embedded in social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (Lin, 2001 : 29). This conceives of social capital as assets in social networks. In social capital categorisations, *bonding capital* is used to denote links between closely connected groups (Putnam, 1993; Ramirez-Sanchez and Pinkerton, 2009). These are limited and exclusionary (Putnam, 2000). *Bridging capital* indicates ties to those who are known more distantly (Putnam, 1993). Finally, *linking capital*, describes connections which reach beyond a given community to facilitate access to external resources (Woolcock, 2001). *Bonding capital* underpins tight cohesion and individualised reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). *Bridging and linking capital* each involve the activation of networks beyond tightly knit social groups, and therefore the potential for connecting people across social stratifications. Bridging and linkage can thereby engender a broader reciprocity which facilitates the activation of resources beyond those available within closely connected groups (Putnam, 2000; Field, 2016).

We adapt those classifications as a framework for considering the activation of social networks underpinning the operation of SW2020. *Bonding capital* is used to denote the close professional ties of platformed actors who publish regularly, and have an established outlet of some nature, to express views and promote ideas. These are, typically, academics but also include campaigners and independent researchers who have a platform for their ideas through regularly writing for publication. *Bridging capital* is used to conceive of the way in which connections may be forged between these platformed actors and with other stakeholders in social work— people with lived experience, practitioners and students who do not have as ready access to such a platform. *Linking capital* is applied as the way in which the bridging links between platformed actors were used to leverage access to a wider public platform through SW2020.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of Contents of SW2020 (excluding editorials)

Main role of Article contributor	Edition 1	Edition 2	Edition 3	Edition 4	Edition 5*	Overall totals
Academic/researchers	6	9	4	6	14	39 (40%)
People with lived experience	10	3	5	4	5	27 (28%)
Practitioner	2	5	0	4	8	19 (19%)
Student	0	1	4	1	7	13 (13%)
Total article each edition	18	18	13	15	34	98

An analysis of the submissions published by the magazine is provided in *Table 1*. As a categorical system these inevitably shoehorn contributors into one primary category when they could have been placed in another. For example, some articles were co-written and the category has been determined by a judgement of either the principal contributor or focus of the submission. Similarly, we acknowledge that any of our contributors may have lived experience of one kind or another but this was not how they primarily identified when writing for the magazine. Nonetheless, the table provides a useful overview of the breakdown of contributors by their principally stated role within social work on submission to the magazine. While academics and independent researchers were the largest group of contributors (40% of contributions), compared to most academic journals, there was also a high proportion of contributions from authors who had lived experience (over a quarter of contributions) and who were practitioners (just under a fifth of contributions). While

students were the smallest category of contributors, with just over a tenth of published submissions, this is still substantially higher than in most journals.

Using the adapting categories from social capital, we observe that there were two main routes which led to publication in *SW2020*. The first involved activating *bonding capital* links which the editorial collective had via pre-existing networks in order to solicit submissions. Submissions via this route also involved those within our broader professional networks approaching us to propose a contribution on seeing, or hearing of, the magazine. Given the professional backgrounds of five of the collective it is unsurprising that submissions received via this route principally came from academics. However, the fact we had a practitioner on the collective was important in bolstering connections to practice networks via *bonding* links. Over and above this, the collective had pre-established links with a number of grassroots organisations so several people with lived experience, practitioners, as well as a small number of students, were approached via these connections. Consistent with the fact these networks principally consisted of *bonding* links between platformed actors, these contributors tended to already possess the means to disseminate their ideas through journals, books, websites, prominent blogs and well circulated Twitter threads. The medium of *SW2020* provided such contributors with an additional mechanism for disseminating their ideas.

The second major route to submissions engaged *bridging capital*. This worked via people approaching the collective who were not in our previous professional networks, but who had heard of the magazine via Twitter or word of mouth. Members of the collective also approached those who were not in our prior networks whom we had seen posting on issues of relevance to the magazine on Twitter, or other online fora. Whatever the limitations of Twitter, the medium provides an important *bridging capital* function by allowing the establishment of links between people in discrete social networks who share common interests. While some of the submissions we received via this route were occasionally from other academics who were not in our pre-existing networks - particularly those based outside the UK - they were more likely to be from people with lived experience, practitioners and students. Accordingly, the medium of *SW2020* acted more as a *linking capital* mechanism for these contributors, providing access to a prominent social work platform which would not have otherwise been available to them, or at least as easily available. The range

of submission forms which *SW2020* accepted also facilitated submissions from people who were engaged via this *bridging* route.

It was symbolically important that these submissions appeared in the same editions of the magazine alongside more traditional short-journal like pieces from established academics, and with the same status and authority. As we suggest above, this mixing of diverse outputs should sit entirely comfortably with a more rounded view of what social work knowledge should consist: the experiential, personal and reflective need to be placed alongside more traditional forms of research evidence, and each respected as sources to guide practice and its development. Notably, the success of the magazine in attracting contributions from non-academic authors proved no barrier to academics submitting to the magazine themselves, as *Table 1* attests. This suggests that social work academics were very content to see their academic outputs placed alongside those of a more experiential, reflective and creative nature from non-academics. We would also suggest that the format of the magazine – encouraging more informal blog-style submissions - may have freed academics to explore arguments and issues that are not always possible within the confines of traditional academic conventions in journals. We are aware that the exposure of academics' work in *SW2020* sometimes led to new connections around their research area. Just as non-platformed actors benefited from the higher profile *SW2020* gave their work, so platformed actors benefited from having their work placed alongside pieces which spoke directly, and powerfully, to experiences of social work practices and government policies with a high degree of currency, and with significant prominence.

That the magazine attracted fewer submissions from students can partly be attributed to timing - many students have been struggling with considerable disruption to placements and studies, and have been concerned about graduating and seeking employment during this time. We also suggest this can be explained by the fact we did not directly solicit many submissions from students, but instead mainly relied on them approaching the collective. This was in turn reflective of the absence of a student social worker on the collective and a decision from the academic members of the editorial collective that we would not, in general, pro-actively solicit submissions from students within our own institutions: we felt that the magazine could have become too insular had we done so, rather than connective to a wider community. Therefore, *bridging* links were a far more prominent route for

student submission than *bonding* links. In future, it would be worth considering how to encourage greater numbers of student submissions via *bridging* links. Had our invite to a student social worker to join the collective been accepted we might have also expected to see more student submissions via *bonding* links. It is still worth emphasising that, despite the lower number of student submissions, we received submissions from social work students in each of the four home countries and pedagogy and social work placements under Covid-19 were the focus of three submissions by social work educators: therefore students were 'in mind' in the magazine subject matter, even if they were not quite as well represented as other categories of contributors.

SW2020 also provides a learning resource which students can access to support their learning. We are aware many students are either being asked, or wish to reflect, the context of Covid within their assessed university work. There is a challenge in doing so in that there is not yet much published work which they can draw upon which focusses on the Covid crisis and social work. Even special journal calls, such as this one, have a substantial timelag which may mean material is published too late for some students' requirements. The immediacy of *SW2020* means students have been able to access material around social work experiences and responses to Covid during the time these issues were live for them. The material will also remain available for future groups of students on an ongoing basis. During the writing of this article, we sought informal feedback, via Twitter, on whether *SW2020* was being used as a social work learning tool. Clearly, such feedback is anecdotal and unanonymised, but it provided an initial indication. Encouragingly, ten social work educators responded that the magazine had been either put on reading lists, or students had been directed towards it, suggesting they believed that it provided important learning for students. It was too early for these educators to yet comment on whether students had found the magazine useful, or referenced it in their submissions. Two social work students also responded to the Twitter request and reported that they had found *SW2020* useful: notably they each cited that experiential submissions, by a carer and a birth parent, had been the most useful of all for them. This reinforces the contention that such experiential knowledge should be accorded due status within the social work 'canon'.

Conclusion

SW2020 was undoubtedly successful in generating a significant readership within the UK, as well as internationally, and in attracting a large, varied, number of contributions from different stakeholders in social work. It shows the possibility of setting up such a platform quickly and effectively, and also shows the appetite for it within the social work community during the unprecedented context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given this, it may be asked why the collective took the decision to end the magazine. There were two reasons. The principal one was that when we established it, we stated that it would run so long as the Covid 'crisis' ran but had always intended it as a temporary initiative. While the effects of the pandemic are certainly still live, and the word 'crisis' may still apply, by the time the fifth edition had been published the UK had moved out of the initial lockdown period. Whether it returns to one remains to be seen, but it felt like an appropriate juncture to cease the magazine. Secondly, there were other pressing work priorities for each of the collective that meant continuing the magazine was becoming increasingly challenging – one of the downsides to running a free publication, as opposed to a traditional journal, is the absence of administrative support in doing so.

Despite winding the magazine up, we believe that an appetite for similar outlets remains and that this would support other similar ventures to thrive: *SW2020* has demonstrated the desire there is within the social work community for an accessible and free platform for the expression of ideas about social work.

In concluding, we would also like to emphasise our view of *SW2020* as a tool for promoting social justice. The promotion of the views and experiences of those without a prior platform in social work is itself highly worthwhile. We propose that the development of *bonding* and *bridging* social capital during the life of *SW2020* also created a space for 'everyday activism'. Everyday activism is defined as everyday talk and action which, while not consciously coordinated, is underpinned by a social movement, and is intended to produce social change (Mansfield, 2013). Such activism was apparent across the diverse range of submissions to the magazine. People who may not necessarily frame themselves as activists found, and used, a space to raise awareness of issues of importance to them, and engage others in the social work community around them in the process. Across the submissions there was abundant commitment to articulating issues of injustice or inequality which had been amplified by the pandemic, as well numerous examples of the ways in which communities have come together in an attempt to find solutions and overcome

adversities. Matters highlighted within the magazine have also gone some way to galvanising further activity outside the magazine. As such, we propose that *SW2020* illustrated everyday activism in providing a platform for the articulation of pressing issues within social work, through which it became a vehicle for emergent dialogue and further activities supporting social change outside the magazine. By giving a free, online, discursive platform for new ideas, as well as new voices, we believe that in small, but notable, ways *SW2020* has played a role in furthering social justice within the social work field.

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